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Iowa Climate Statement 2020: Will COVID-19 Lessons Help Us Survive Climate Change?

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Iowa Climate Statement 2020: Will COVID-19 Lessons Help Us Survive Climate Change?

Abstract

The current SARS-CoV2 pandemic is a social, humanitarian, and economic crisis that was predicted by experts but made worse by a failure to act proactively on those warnings. As scientists teaching and studying climate and its impacts, we believe there are three important lessons from the current pandemic that apply to our understanding of climate mitigation and adaptation in Iowa.

Disciplines

Climate | Economics | Inequality and Stratification | Public Health | Science and Technology Studies

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Iowa Climate Statement 2020: Will COVID-19 Lessons Help Us Survive Climate Change?

The current SARS-CoV2 pandemic is a social, humanitarian, and economic crisis that was predicted by experts but made worse by a failure to act proactively on those warnings. As scientists teaching and studying climate and its impacts, we believe there are three important lessons from the current pandemic that apply to our understanding of climate mitigation and adaptation in Iowa:

- 1. The best available science as described by professional organizations remains by far the most reliable source of information.** In the face of political polarization, some have taken up the strategy of de-legitimizing science when it leads to conclusions that go against their policy goals. But distrust in expert guidance and delayed action led to increased deaths and economic loss in the US.¹ In climate science, as elsewhere, our rigorous peer-review process is designed to reduce errors and bias over time and produce results with high levels of confidence. Consensus science such as publications from the national academies and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is by far the most reliable information available to decision-makers.
- 2. The cost of late action far outweighs the costs of prevention and preparation.** Congress has allocated trillions of dollars in emergency funds to respond to the economic contraction caused by COVID-19. However, economic costs and deaths in many countries that had invested early in preventive or protective measures were greatly reduced. Similarly, researchers have identified multiple areas where preventive spending today can offset much higher costs to address climate impacts later, especially in the areas of emissions reductions and investments in resilience.^{2,3}
- 3. Building community resilience against multiple threats is critical, especially for the most vulnerable among us.** The disproportionate number of poor people and racial minorities who have suffered severe illness or death from this pandemic has highlighted deep inequities that weaken our entire society. Many of the same actions that reduce vulnerability to pandemics and natural disasters will also increase resilience to climatic changes. Policies and design choices encouraging healthy interactions within communities can improve supportive relationships among community members during times of crisis.⁴ Inequity reduces resilience, leaving poor communities, particularly communities of color, disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate-related natural disasters, just as they are to disease.^{5,6} Society's increasing exposure to compound hazards (where different factors combine to make a problem worse) multiplies dangers. Examples include flooding, which displaces families during a disease outbreak, extreme heat that increases vulnerability and death among those who lack access to air conditioning or after a loss of electricity, and drought-induced food losses.

COVID-19 recovery plans have revealed unprecedented opportunities to address climate change while simultaneously rebuilding the economy. Nations around the world are now developing "green economic stimulus plans" that will direct recovery funds. Energy efficiency programs, alternative transportation, renewable energy, green jobs, electric and smart vehicles, education, research and development, and the like,⁷ are programs shown to return many times more than was spent.⁸ Our leaders should adopt comprehensive rebuilding concepts in Iowa: our smart investments now will better prepare us for the coming decades when extreme climate events (such as floods, damaging winds, heat, and drought) will become more common and more severe.

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